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A
DISSERTATION
ON
ANCIENT TRAGEDY.

By the Reverend
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Late Greek Professor in the University of Cambridge.

MDCCLXVIII.

DISSEMINATION

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THE

COAST

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A

DISSERTATION

ON

ANCIENT TRAGEDY.

INTRODUCTION.

WHILST the taste, genius, and knowledge of the ancients have been universally felt and acknowledged in every other part of polite literature, it is matter of admiration to consider, that the Greek Theatre should so long have remained in neglect and obscurity. In philosophy, morals, oratory, and heroic poetry, in every art and science, we look back to Greece, as the standard and model of perfection: the ruins of Athens afford, even to this day, fresh pleasure and delight; and nothing but her stage seems to be forgotten by us. Homer, Xenophon, Demosthenes, and many other eminent Greek writers, have of late years put on an English habit, and gained admission into what is called polite company; whilst Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, still lurk in schools and colleges; and very sel-

dom make their appearance, at least with dirty leaves, in the libraries of the great. To what shall we attribute a judgment so capricious and so unaccountable? partly, perhaps, to the hasty severity of ignorant foes, and partly to the outrageous zeal of * mistaken friendship. The fate of Ancient Tragedy hath, indeed, been singularly unfortunate; some painters have drawn too flattering a likeness of her; whilst others have presented us with nothing but a caricature: some exalt the Greek drama, as the most perfect of all human compositions, without the least spot or blemish; whilst others affect to call it the infant state of the stage, weak, infirm and imperfect; and, as such, treat it with the highest degree of negligence and contempt: exaggerated thus on the one hand by the extravagant encomiums of injudicious learning, and debased on the other by the rash censures of modern petulance, its real and intrinsic merit hath never been thoroughly known, or candidly enquired into. The best method however in this,

* The remarks, which are handed down to us on Ancient Tragedy, have hitherto, for the most part, consisted of mere verbal criticisms, various readings, or general and trite exclamations of undistinguishing applause, made by dull and phlegmatic commentators, totally void of taste and judgment; add to this, that the old tragedians have been shamefully disguised and misrepresented to the unlearned by the false medium of bad translations.

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as in every other disputed point, is to set aside all prejudice and authority, and determine the cause by our own reason and judgment, from a fair, full, and impartial view of it.

That the spectator may be able to form a proper and complete idea of any object presented to him, it is necessary to place him in such a situation, as that his eye may at once comprehend the whole, and every part of it: for this purpose, I have collected and ranged in order a few materials, which, in the hand of some abler writer, may possibly lay the foundation for a complete history of the Ancient Drama: in the mean time, the following sheets confine themselves to, and pretend to no more than a brief account of the origin and progress of the Greek Tragedy; its end and purport, the several parts, properties, and conduct of it; the construction, scenery, and decorations of the theatre; to which is added, a transient, but necessary view of the genius, character and situation, religion, morals and politics of the people, before whom it was represented; together with a short sketch of the lives and characters of the three great tragedians.

On the Origin of TRAGEDY.

NOTHING is more agreeable to the inquisitive mind, than to trace the gradual improvement of any art or science; to mark the causes of its growth and culture, and pursue it through its various stages of perfection: it is much to be lamented therefor, that neither Aristotle, nor any other writer on Ancient Tragedy, hath given us an exact or regular account of its progress and advancement from the time of its birth to that of its maturity and splendor; the few scattered anecdotes, which remain concerning it, rather serving to awaken our curiosity than to afford us any full and satisfactory information.

Tragedy was, in its infancy, like every other production of human art, extremely weak, low, and contemptible: that wide and deep stream, which flows with such strength and rapidity through cultivated Greece, took its rise from a small and inconsiderable fountain, which hides itself in the recesses of antiquity, and is almost buried in oblivion: the name alone remains to give us some light into its original nature, and to inform us that Tragedy, like every other species of poetry, owed its birth to religion.

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Tragedy, or the * song of the goat, was only a sacred hymn. Bacchus, we are told, the first cultivator of vines, imparted his secret to a petty prince in Attica, named Icarius, who, happening one day to espy a goat, browsing on his plantations, immediately seized and offered him up as a sacrifice to his divine benefactor: the peasants assembled round their master, assisted in the ceremony, and expressed their joy and gratitude, in songs and dances on the occasion: the † sacrifice grew into a festi-

* From *Τραγος*, a goat, *ωδὴ*, a song. The commentators, not content with this most natural and obvious interpretation, have given us several others. Some of them turn *Τραγωδία* into *Τρυγωδία*, and so derive it into *Τρυξ*, the lees of wine, with which we are told the actors smeared their faces: others inform us, that *Τρυξ* signifies new wine, a skin of which was, it seems, usually given to the poet (like the butt of sack to our laureats) as a reward for his labours: but I shall not trouble my reader with the enumeration of their whimsical conjectures.

† This story is told by Brumoy, and by twenty others, with little variation. It seems, notwithstanding, to carry with it the air of a fiction, so far as it regards Icarius, who seems only to have been introduced because Icaria was famous for vines, and (as Spon tells us in his voyage to Italy) was the first place where they sacrificed a goat to Bacchus, and also, where tragedies and comedies were first exhibited: but surely the song of the goat might be accounted for, without application to any particular person. Bacchus, being the acknowledged inventor and cultivator of the vine, it was

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val, and the festival into an annual solemnity, attended most probably every year with additional circumstances, when the countrymen flocked together in crowds, and sung in rustic strains the praises of their favourite deity. The rural sacrifice became, in process of time, a solemn feast, and assumed all the pomp and splendor of a religious ceremony: poets were employed by the magistrate to compose hymns or songs for the occasion: such was the rudeness and simplicity of the age, that their bards contended for a prize, which, as † Horace intimates, was scarce worth contending for; being no more than a goat or skin of wine, which was given to the happy poet, who acquitted himself best in the task assigned to him.

This was probably the period when Thespis first pointed out the tragic path, by his introduction of a new personage, who relieved the chorus or troop of singers, by reciting part of some well-known history or fable, which gave time for the chorus to rest. All that the actor

most natural that the first planters should sacrifice to him the destroyers of it; the goat being a creature as remarkably fond of the leaves of the vine, as his sacrificer was of the juice of the grape; we shall find that he fell a victim not to Bacchus alone; and that the poet, as well as the god, came in for a share of him.

† Vilem certavit ob hircum.

Art. Poet.

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repeated between the songs of the chorus*, was called an episode or additional part; consisting often of different adventures which had no connection with each other. Thus the chorus, or song, which was at first the only, and afterwards the principal performance, became gradually and insensibly but an inconsiderable, though, as we shall see hereafter, a necessary and ornamental part of the drama.

From this time, we may imagine, the actor or reciter was more attended to than the chorus. However his part was executed, it had the powerful charms of novelty to recommend it, and quickly obscured the lustre of the chorus, whose songs were now of a different nature, insomuch, that the original subject of them, the praise of Bacchus, was by degrees either slightly mentioned, or totally passed over and forgotten: the priests, who, we may suppose, for a long time presided over the whole, were alarmed at so open a contempt of the deity, and unanimously exclaimed, that all this† was nothing to Bacchus; the complaint

* When Tragedy assumed a regular form, these recitations which, during its imperfect state, were only adventitious ornaments, became the principal and constituent parts of the drama, the subject of them, drawn from one and the same action, retaining their first name of episode.

† *ὅτι οὐδὲν πρὸς Βάκχον.*

grew into a kind of proverbial saying, and as such is handed down to us.

From the origin of tragedy, to the days of Thespis, and from his time to that of Æschylus, all is doubt, conjecture and obscurity; neither Aristotle, nor any other antient writer, give us the least insight into the state and progress of the Greek drama: if his treatise called * *Διδασκαλίας* had reached posterity, it would probably have afforded us much pleasure and instruction: the names of a few, and but a few tragedians, during this dark period, are handed down to us: such were † Epigenes the Sicyonian, and Pratinas, who wrote fifty plays, thirty-two of which are said to have been satyrical: after Thespis, came his scholar Phrynicus, who wrote nine tragedies, for ‡ one of which we are told he was fined fifty drachmas, because he had made it (an odd reason) too deep, and too affecting: there was also another Phrynicus author of || two tragedies; to these we must add § Alcæus, Phormus,

* This treatise contained an exact account of the names, times, and authors of all the plays that were ever acted.

† The *Bacchæ*, a tragedy of his, is cited by Athenæus.

‡ See Strabo, Herodotus and Plutarch.

|| Called *Andromeda* and *Erigone*.

§ Mentioned by Macrobius and Pollux.

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and * Chærilus; together with Cephisodorus, an Athenian, who wrote the Amazons; and Apollophanes, supposed to have been the author of a tragedy, named Daulis; though Suidas is of another opinion.

Tragedy, during the lives of these writers, had in all probability made but a slow progress, and received very little culture or improvement, when at length the great Æschylus arose, who from this rude and undigested chaos created, as it were, a new world in the system of letters. Poets, and even epic poets, there might perhaps have been before Homer; dramatic writers there certainly were before Æschylus; the former notwithstanding we may with the utmost propriety stile the inventor and father of heroic poetry, and the latter of the antient drama, which before his time doth not appear to have had any form, shape or beauty. He first introduced dialogue, that most essential part of tragedy, by the addition of a second personage, threw the whole fable into action, and restored the chorus to it's antient dignity.

Æschylus, having like a tender parent endowed his darling child with every mental ac-

* Chærilus is said to have written no less than a hundred and twenty tragedies.

B

complishment, seemed resolved that no external ornaments should be wanting to render her universally amiable: he clothed her therefor in the most splendid habit, and bestowed on her every thing that art could procure to heighten and improve her charms. We know, from good authority, that fifty years before his time, Thespis exhibited his rude performances in a cart, and besmeared the faces of his actors with the lees of wine, probably to disguise their persons and give them the appearance of those whom they represented; but Æschylus, who, as being himself author, actor, and manager, took upon him the whole conduct of the drama, did not neglect any part of it; he improved the scenery and decorations, brought his actors into a regular and well-constructed theatre, raised his heroes on the cothurnus or buskin, invented the masques, and introduced splendid * habits with long trains, that give an air of majesty and dignity to the performers.

From the time when tragedy began to assume a regular form, we find her closely following the steps of epic poetry; all the parts of the epopée, or heroic poem, may be traced in tragedy; though, as Aristotle observes, all the parts of tragedy are not to be found in the epopée; whence the partisans of the stage with some reason conclude, that perfection in the

* ——— personae, pallaeque repertor honestae
 Æschylus, et modicis instravit pulpita tignis,
 Et docuit magnumque loqui, nitique cothurno. HOR.

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former is more difficult to be attained than in the latter. Without entering into this dispute, we may venture however to stile * Homer the source and fountain of the ancient drama; from him the tragedians drew the plan, construction, and conduct of their fables, and not unfrequently the fable itself; to him they applied for propriety of manners, character, sentiment and diction.

From this æra then, we are to consider tragedy as an elegant and noble structure; built according to the rules of art, symmetry, and proportion; whose every part was in itself fair, firm and compact, and at the same time contributed to the beauty, usefulness and duration of the whole edifice. Sophocles and Euripides carefully studied the plan laid down by Æschylus, and by their superior genius and judgment improved it in a short time to it's highest state of perfection, from which it gradually declined to the introduction of the Roman drama.

* Homer, says Aristotle, was the first who *αἰνεστικὸν δράματιναι ἐκείνην*, invented dramatic imitations.

* There was no more left for tragedy (says Lord Shaftsbury) than to erect a stage, and draw his dialogues and characters into scenes, turning in the same manner upon one principal action or event, with regard to place and time; which was suitable to a real spectacle.*

See CHARACTERIST. vol. II.

On the Parts of Ancient TRAGEDY.

AMONGST many other erroneous opinions concerning the Greek tragedy, adopted by modern editors and commentators, the unwarrantable division, which they have made of it into * acts, is perhaps the most remarkable, as there doth not seem to be the least ground or foundation for it: in the first place, neither Athenæus, nor any of the ancient writers, who have given us quotations from the Greek plays, mention the act where the several passages are to be found; which they would most naturally have done, had any such division ever taken place. It may be likewise observed, that the word † ACT does not once occur in that treatise of Aristotle, which gives us so exact a definition of every part of the Greek drama; add to this, that the tragedies themselves carry with them sufficient proof that no such thing was ever thought on by the authors of them; notwithstanding which, ‡ Vossius, Barnes, and several other

* See a dissertation on this subject, by Mons. Vatry, in the hist. de l'acad. vol. 8. p. 188.

† The word *δραμα*, which we translate an act, signifies the whole performance, or drama, and could not possibly therefor mean any one particular part of it.

‡ Chorus, says Vossius, *pars fabulae post actum, vel inter actum et actum.* See inst. poet. l. 2.

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editors, have discovered an office of the chorus, which the poet never assigned them, namely, their use in dividing the acts, the intervals of which were supplied by their songs; though it is evident that the business of the chorus (as will sufficiently appear in the following account of it) was, on the other hand, to prevent any such unnatural pause or vacancy in the drama, as the division into acts must necessarily produce. Besides that, if we take the word *act* in that sense which the modern use of it demands, we shall find it in the Greek tragedies composed sometimes of a single scene, and sometimes of half a dozen; and * if the songs or intermedes of the chorus are to determine the num-

* On looking into the chorusses of Sophocles as they stand in the original, we find that the Ajax, besides the χομμοι (which will be explained hereafter) has five, which are thus unequally divided; to the first act two; the second one; the third one; the fourth one; the fifth none at all: the Trachiniæ has six; the Electra but three; and the Philoctetes but one regular song or intermede in the whole play. If it be granted therefor, as I think it is on all hands, that wherever we meet with strophe and antistrophe, and there only we are to conceive that the chorus sung, nothing can be more absurd than to make those songs dividers of the acts, when it is evident that the chorus sung only as occasion offered, and the circumstances of the drama required, which accounts for the irregularity and difference in the numbers of them. If the reader will take the trouble to examine the ancient tragedies, he will find what I have said confirmed in every one of them.

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ber of acts, the play will consist not always of five, according to our own custom, but at one time of only three, and at another of seven or eight. * Horace has indeed told us, that there should be but five acts; but it does not from thence follow that it always was so: the truth after all is, that this mistake, as well as many others, arose from an error common almost to the whole race of writers and critics on ancient tragedy, who have unanimously agreed to confound the Greek and Roman drama, concluding them both to be governed by the same laws, though they are in many parts essentially different: they never allow for the time between Aristotle and Horace, but leap from one to the other with the utmost agility: it is plain, however, from † the reasons here

* Neve minor, neu sit quinto productior actu.

† Many other reasons equally forcible might be alleged, some of which the reader will find scattered about in the notes to my translation of Sophocles. I shall only observe here, that the old editions of the Greek tragedies, so far from dividing them into acts, do not so much as make the least separation of the scenes; even the names of the persons are not always properly affixed to the speeches; no notice is taken of the entrances and exits of the actors; the asides are never marked, nor any of the gestures or actions, which frequently occur, pointed out to us in the margin; defects which, however inconsiderable, may mislead the young and injudicious reader, and which ought therefore to be carefully supplied by the critic or translator.

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mentioned, that the antient Greek tragedy was one continued representation from beginning to end.

The division into acts therefor is undoubtedly a piece of modern refinement; which, as much may be said on both sides, I shall not stop either to condemn or approve, but proceed to the only division which the ancients ever made; a division, which nature points out to this and every other composition, viz. a * beginning, a middle, and an end; or in the words of Aristotle, the prologue, the episode, and the exode.

The PROLOGUE of antient tragedy, was not unlike the *προαυλιον* or overture in music, or the proœmium in oratory, containing all that part of the drama, which † preceded the first song, or intermede of the chorus.

* The cause and design of undertaking any action are, the beginning; the effects of those causes and the difficulties we find in the execution of that design are, the middle; the unravelling and resolving those difficulties are, the end. See Bossu's treatise on epic poetry.

† Aristotle must certainly be understood to mean not the first entrance, but the first song or intermede of the chorus; because, as Dacier and other writers have observed, there are tragedies (as the *Perse* and *Suppliants* of *Æschylus*) where the chorus enters first on the stage and opens the play: to such therefor, if Aristotle meant the speaking and not the song, there would be no pro-

What Aristotle calls the prologue should contain, according to the antient critics, all those circumstances which are necessary to be known for the better understanding and comprehension of the whole drama, as the place of the scene, the time when the action commences, the names and characters of the persons concerned, together with such an insight into the plot as might awaken the curiosity of the spectator, without letting him too far into the design and conduct of it. This, however easy it may seem at first view, is so difficult, that it has scarce ever been performed with any degree of perfection. Of the Greek tragedians, Sophocles alone seems to have succeeded in this particular, the prologues of † Æschylus being quite rude and inartificial, and those of

logue; a contradiction which is avoided by understanding what is here said of the *παροδος*, or first song, which never begins till the prologue is over, and matter furnished to the chorus for the intermede.

† According to this rule, the prologues of Æschylus and Euripides will by no means stand the test of examination; that part of the tragedy, which precedes the first song of the chorus, being often employed, by those writers, either in absurd addresses to the spectators, or in the relation of things extremely foreign to the purpose of the drama, frequently anticipating the incidents and circumstances of the play, and even sometimes acquainting the audience before-hand with the catastrophe; all of them capital errors, which the superior judgment of Sophocles taught him carefully to avoid.

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Euripides for the most part tedious and confused.

The *EPISODE* is all that part of the tragedy, which is between the songs or intermedes of the chorus: this answers to our second, third, and fourth act, and comprehends all the intrigue or plot to the unravelling or catastrophe, which in the * best antient writers is not made till after the last song of the chorus: the conduct and disposition of the episode may be considered as the surest test of the poet's abilities, as it generally decides the fate of the drama. Here all the art of the writer is necessary to stop the otherwise too rapid progress of his fable, by the intervention of some † new

* Sophocles, who was certainly the most correct of the three great tragedians, has, I think, observed this rule in all his plays but two, viz. *Ajax* and *OEdipus Tyrannus*; for, if the death of *Ajax* is the catastrophe of the tragedy, it is over long before the last song of the chorus; if the leave granted to bury him be the catastrophe, as some critics contend, the episode is confined within its proper limits; but this cannot be allowed without attributing to this piece what is a still greater blemish, a duplicity of action; a dramatic crime, of which Sophocles in that play, I am afraid, cannot easily be acquitted. In the *OEdipus Tyrannus*, it is observable, that the total discovery of *OEdipus's* guilt is made before the last song of the chorus, and becomes the subject of the intermede.

† Brumoy compares the fable of a good tragedy to a large and beautiful temple, which the skill of the ar-

circumstance that involves the persons concerned in fresh difficulties, awakens the attention of the spectators, and leads them as it were insensibly to the most natural conclusion and unravelling of the whole.

The EXODE is all that part of the tragedy, which is recited after the chorus has left off singing; it answers to our fifth act, and contains the unravelling, or catastrophe of the piece; after which, it is remarked by the critics, any song of the chorus would only be tedious and unnecessary, because what is said, when the action is finished, cannot be but short.

chitect hath so contrived as to make it appear at first view of much less extent than it really is, wherein, the farther you advance, the more you are surpris'd at the vast intervening space, which the extraordinary symmetry and proportion of its parts had concealed from the eye.

On the CHORUS.

WE come now to an essential * part of ancient tragedy peculiar to itself; whilst every other member of the building is universally admired, and industriously copied by modern architects, this alone hath been rejected and contemned as ungraceful and unnecessary. The chorus, as I before observed, gave the first hint to the formation of tragedy, and was, as it were, the corner-stone of the whole edifice: as a religious ceremony, it was considered by the multitude with a kind of superstitious veneration; it is not therefor improbable that the first authors of the regular drama willingly gave way to popular prejudices, and for this, among many other reasons, incorporated it into the body of the tragedy: accordingly, we find the chorus of Æschylus resuming it's original office, reciting the praises of the local deities, demi-gods and heroes, taking the part of distressed virtue, and abounding throughout in all these moral precepts, and religious sentiments, by which the writings of the ancients are so eminently and so honourably distinguished.

* Aristotle ranks the chorus amongst what he calls, parts of quantity, and places it after the Exode.

Various are the arguments that have from time to time been produced by the zealous partizans of antiquity, in favour of the tragic chorus, the principal of which, I shall briefly recapitulate and lay before my readers, begging leave at the same time to premise, that whether a chorus is defensible with regard to the ancient theatre, and whether it should be adopted in the modern, are two very different questions, though generally blended and confused by writers on this subject; the former may perhaps be easily proved, though the latter be left totally undetermined. The ancients thought it highly improbable that any great, interesting and important action should be performed without witnesses; their choruses were therefor composed of * such persons as most naturally might be supposed present on

* ‘ A chorus, interposing and bearing a part in the progress of the action, gives the representation that probability and striking resemblance of real life, which every man of sense perceives and feels the want of, upon our stage; a want, which nothing but such an expedient as the chorus could possibly relieve.’

This is the remark of one of the most ingenious and judicious critics, which our own age, or perhaps any other, ever produced: the reader will find it with many others equally just, p. 118 of the first volume of a commentary and notes on Horace's Art of Poetry, and Epistle to Augustus.

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the occasion; † persons, whose situation might so far interest them in the events of the fable, as to render their presence useful and necessary; and yet not so deeply concerned as to make them incapable of performing that office, to which they were more particularly appointed, the giving proper advice, and making proper reflections on every thing that occurred, in the course of the drama; for this purpose, a choriphæus or leader superintended and directed all the rest, spoke for the whole body in the dialogue part, and led the songs and dances in the intermede. By the introduction of a chorus, which bore a part in the action, the ancients avoided the absurdity of monologues and soliloquies, an error, which the moderns have imperceptibly and necessarily fallen into, from their omission of it: they avoided also that miserable resource of distressed poets, the insipid and uninteresting race of confidentes (a refinement, for which we are indebted to the French theatre) who only appear to ask a

† Thus, in the *Ajax* of Sophocles, the chorus is composed of the men of Salamis, his countrymen, and companions; in the *Electra*, of the principal ladies of Mycenæ, her friends and attendants; in the *Philoctetes*, of the companions of Ulysses and Neoptolemus, the only persons who could with any propriety be introduced. The rest of this writer's plays, and his only, will stand the test of examination by the rule here mentioned.

foolish question, listen to the secrets of their superiors, and laugh or cry as they are commanded.

But the great use and advantage of the chorus will best appear, when we come to consider it in its moral capacity. In that illustrious period, which may be called the golden age of tragedy, the stage was not only the principal, but almost the only vehicle of instruction. Philosophy applied to the liberal arts for their influence and assistance; she appeared in the theatre even before she dictated in the academy, and Socrates is supposed to have delivered many of his excellent precepts, by the mouth of his favourite * poet: this sufficiently accounts for the sententious and didactic part of the ancient drama; for all that profusion of moral and religious sentiments, which tires the patience and disgusts the delicacy of modern readers: the critics of those times were of opinion (however they may differ from our own in this par-

* Hence Euripides was called 'ο επι της σκηνης φιλοσοφος; the philosopher of the theatre,' 'in iis (says Quintilian) quæ a sapientibus tradita sunt, ipsis pæne par.' With regard to Socrates, his friendship with this poet is universally known, 'εδοκει συμποιειν Ευριπιδην, says Diogenes Laertius. The comic poets of that time did not scruple to ascribe several of Euripides's plays to Socrates, as they afterwards did those of Terence to Lælius and Scipio.

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ticular) that the first and principal characters of the piece were too deeply interested in their own concerns, and too busy in the prosecution of their several designs and purposes, to be at leisure to make moral or political reflections: such, therefor, they very judiciously for the most part put into the mouth of the chorus; this, at the same time, * prevented the illiterate, and undistinguishing part of the audience, from mistaking the characters, or drawing hasty and false conclusions from the incidents and circumstances of the drama: the poet by these means leading them as it were insensibly into such sentiments and affections as he had intended to excite, and a conviction of those moral and religious truths which he meant to inculcate.

But the chorus had likewise another † office,

* Euripides being obliged to put some bold and impious sentiments into the mouth of a wicked character, the audience were angry with the poet, and looked upon him as the real villain, whom his actor represented: the story is told by Seneca. ‘ Now if such an audience (says the ingenious writer, whom I quoted above) could so easily misinterpret an attention to the truth of character into the real doctrine of the poet, and this too, when a chorus was at hand to correct and disabuse their judgments, what must be the case when the whole is left to the sagacity and penetration of the people?’

† The office of the chorus is divided by Aristotle into three parts, which he calls *παιροδός*, *σασιμον*, and *χορμοί*;

which was, to relieve the spectator, during the pauses and intervals of the action, by an ode or song adapted to the occasion, naturally arising from the incidents, and † connected with the subject of the drama: here the author generally gave a loose to his imagination, displayed his poetical abilities, and sometimes, perhaps too often, wandered from the scene of action into the regions of fancy; the audience notwithstanding were pleased with this short relaxation, and agreeable variety; soothed by the power of numbers and the excellency of the composition, they easily forgave the writer,

the *parados* is the first song of the chorus; the *stasimon* is all that which the chorus sings after it has taken possession of the stage, and is incorporated into the action; and the *commoi* are those lamentations so frequent in the Greek writers, which the chorus and the actors make together. See the second scene of the second act of *Ajax*, in my translation; *Philoctetes*, act first, scene third; the beginning of the *Oedipus Coloneus*, together with many other parts of *Sophocles's* tragedies, where the *commoi* are easily distinguishable from the regular songs of the chorus.

† ———— *Neu quid medios intercinat actus*

Quod non proposito conducatur et hæreat apte. HOR.

This connection with the subject of the drama, so essentially necessary to a good chorus, is not always to be found in the tragedies of *Æschylus* and *Euripides*, the latter of which is greatly blamed by *Aristotle* for his carelessness in this important particular; the correct *Sophocles* alone hath strictly observed it.

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 27

and returned as it were with double attention to his prosecution of the main subject: to this part of the ancient chorus we are indebted for some of the noblest flights of poetry, as well as the finest sentiments that adorn the writings of the Greek tragedians. The number of persons composing the chorus was probably at first indeterminate, varying according to the circumstances and plot of the drama. *Æschylus*, we are told, brought no less than fifty into his * *Eumenides*, but was obliged to reduce them to twelve; *Sophocles* was afterwards permitted to add three; a limitation, which we have reason to imagine became a rule to succeeding poets.

When the chorus consisted of fifteen, the persons composing it ranged themselves in three rows, of five each, or five rows of three; and in this order advanced or retreated from the right-hand to the left, which is called † strophe,

* In the *Eumenides* of *Æschylus*, the chorus consisted of fifty furies, whose habits, gesture, and whole appearance was by the art of the poet rendered so formidable as to frighten the whole audience; an accident which so alarmed the public, that a decree was immediately issued, to limit the number of the chorus.

† It doth not appear that the old tragedians confined themselves to any strict rules, with regard to the division of strophe, antistrophe and epode, as we find the choral songs consisting sometimes of a strophe only, sometimes of strophe and antistrophe, without the e-

and then back from the left to the right, which we call antistrophe; after which they stood still in the midst of the stage, and sung the epode.

* Some writers attribute the original of these evolutions to a mysterious imitation of the motion of the heavens, stars, and planets; but the conjecture seems rather whimsical. The dance, we may imagine, (if so we may venture to call it) was slow and solemn, or quick and lively, according to the words, sentiments, and occasion; and, in so spacious a theatre as that of Athens, might admit of such grace and variety in its motions, as would render it extremely agreeable to the spectators: the petulance of modern criticism has frequently made bold to ridicule the use of song and dance in ancient tragedy, not considering (as Brumoy observes) that dancing is, in reality, only a more graceful way of moving, and music; but a more agreeable manner of expression; nor,

pode. The observing reader will find many other irregularities of this kind in a perusal of the Greek tragedies.

* ‘ Le Chœur (says Brumoy) alloit de droit à gauche, pour exprimer le cours journalier du firmament d’orient en occident, ce tour s’appelloit strophe; il declinoit ensuite de gauche à droite, par égard aux planettes, qui outre le mouvement commun ont encore le leur particulier d’occident vers l’orient, c’étoit l’antistrophe, ou le retour; enfin le chœur s’arretoit au milieu du théâtre pour y chanter un morceau qu’on nommoit epode, et pour marquer par cette situation la stabilité de la terre.’

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 29

indeed, can any good reason be assigned why they should not be admitted, if properly introduced and carefully managed, into the most serious compositions. To say the truth, nothing is more astonishing than the prejudices we entertain, and the partiality we shew, with regard to our own modes and customs: we condemn the chorusses of the ancients, which supplied with decency and propriety the vacant parts of the drama; and how do we fill up our own? To be convinced of our injustice and absurdity, let us suppose Sophocles, or Euripides, transported from the shades of elysium, and entering one of our noisy theatres, between the acts; the audience engaged in bowing or talking to each other, and the music entertaining them with a jig of Vivaldi, or the rost beef of old England, how would they be surpris'd in a few minutes, to find that all this disorder, riot and confusion, was in the midst of a most pathetic and interesting tragedy, and that the warmest passions of the human heart were broken in upon and enfeebled by this strange and unnatural interruption!

The chorus continued on the stage during the whole representation of the piece, unless when some very extraordinary * circumstance

* As in the Ajax of Sophocles, where the chorus leave the stage in search of that hero, and by that means

required their absence; this obliged the poet to a continuity of action, as the chorus could not have any excuse for remaining on the spot, when the affair, which called them together, was at an end; it preserved also the unity of time; for if the poet, as † Hedelin observes, had comprehended in his play a week, a month, or a year, how could the spectators be made to believe that the people, who were before them, could have passed so long a time without eating, drinking, or sleeping? Thus we find that the chorus preserved all the unities of action, time, and place; that it prepared the incidents, and inculcated the moral of the piece; relieved and amused the spectators, presided over and directed the music, made a part of the decoration, and in short pervaded and animated the whole; it rendered the poem more regular, more probable, more pathetic, more noble and magnificent; it was indeed the great chain, which held together and strengthened the several parts of the drama, which without it could only

give him an opportunity of killing himself in the very spot which they had quitted, and which could not have been done with any propriety whilst they were present, and able to prevent it: on these occasions, the chorus frequently divided itself into two parts, or semichorusses, and sung alternately.

† See his whole art of the stage, page 229, of the English translation.

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 31

have exhibited a lifeless and uninteresting scene of irregularity, darkness and confusion.

The ancient chorus notwithstanding, with all its advantages, is not agreeable to every taste; it hath been attacked with great severity, and treated with the utmost contempt; it hath been called arrant pedantry, and excrescency of the drama, a mob of confidants: even writers of approved genius and judgement have said, that it is absurd to imagine the ancients would ever have trusted their secrets, especially those of a criminal nature, to all their domestics; that it is impossible to imagine that fifty, or even fifteen people can keep a secret, fifteen people of the same mind, thought, voice, and expression.

It must be acknowledged, that these critics have selected that part of the office of the chorus, which is most liable to censure; but even if we allow the objection its full force, it will not suffice to condemn the chorus itself, which, in the judicious Sophocles, who avoided the errors and absurdities of his contemporaries, is unexceptionable; in that noble author, nothing is entrusted to the chorus, which ought to be concealed; nor any thing concealed, which ought to be imparted to them; we might therefor perhaps, with equal justice, banish from our own stage, the general prac-

tice of soliloquies, because Shakespear hath frequently drawn them out to an immoderate length, as utterly condemn the whole antient chorus, because Euripides hath, in two or three of his plays, made an improper use of it.

‘ Who shall decide, when doctors disagree ? ’

Some applaud the chorus with a kind of enthusiastic rapture, whilst others endeavour to sink it into universal contempt: for my own part, I cannot but think it absolutely necessary on the ancient stage, and that it might be rendered useful and ornamental even on our own. I am notwithstanding far from being of opinion, that it should be admitted constantly and indiscriminately into the modern theatre; the use of it must depend entirely on the subject: certain it is, that there are many in our own history, as well as in that of other nations, where a chorus might be introduced with the utmost propriety; but if, after all, fashion and prejudice will not suffer them to appear on the stage, they may at least gain admission to the closet; thither let the reader of true taste and judgment, carry *Elfrid* and *Caractacus*, written on the ancient model, and compare them with any of those tinsel flimsy performances that have lately assumed the name of tragedies, which have owed all their success to the false taste of the age, joined to the real merit of the actors in the representation of them.

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 33

On the Verse, Recitation, and Music of
ANTIENT TRAGEDY.

THE art of poetry was considered by the ancients as a part of that general system, which they termed the *μελοποιια*, or melody, and was, in reality, the art of making verses proper to be sung: they looked upon words, not only as signs of particular ideas, but as sounds also, enabled by the assistance of music to express all the passions of the human mind. When in the descriptive parts of the drama, a dreadful or disagreeable object was to be represented, the words were formed of such harsh and jarring syllables, as by grating on the ear might best impress the exactest representation of it; and in like manner, when the grand, the beautiful, or the tender was to be set before the eyes of the spectator, the language was carefully and even painfully adapted to it. The Greeks, who were extremely solicitous to cultivate and improve their language to the highest degree of perfection, took more than ordinary care in the formation of their verse; the quantity of every syllable was carefully ascertained; different words, different dialects, and different feet, were appropriated to different species of poetry; and none infringed on the rights and privileges of another: tragedy indeed, as the

sovereign, assumed a kind of peculiar title to them all; every species of verse was occasionally introduced to adorn and beautify the drama. The iambic was generally made use of in the body of the piece, as approaching, according to the judgment of Aristotle, nearest to common discourse, and therefor most naturally adapted to the dialogue; this rule however is not constantly and invariably observed, but sometimes departed from with judgment; the metre is frequently changed, not only in the songs of the chorus, but in other places, and that generally in the most interesting and impassioned parts of the drama, where, it may here be observed, it is most probable that the music and instruments accompanying the verse were changed also; a happy circumstance for the poet, as it must have afforded an agreeable relief to the audience, who would naturally be fatigued by the repetition of the same sounds, be they ever so harmonious. * If our own times, manners, and taste, would admit of such variations, what additional beauties would

* Since the expulsion of tragedies in rhyme, of all things doubtless the most absurd, some of our best poets have introduced what is called a tag, consisting of three or four couplets, at the end of every act, to relieve the ear from the monotony of blank verse; but even this is now exploded, and we are confined to the repetition of the same continued metre, from beginning to the end.

ON ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 35

they reflect on the British theatre ! but such a change of metre in serious dramatic performances is rendered absolutely impossible, as well from many other obstacles, as from the poverty of our language *, when put in comparison with those of antiquity ; particularly that of Greece, whose superiority over us in this respect is so remarkably visible. On the antient stage, the length or shortness of every syllable was, as it were, fixed and determined, either by nature or by use ; hence the song had a necessary and agreeable conformity with common discourse, which rendered it more intelligible : our † musicians, in the composition of their songs, make short syllables long, and

* ‘ It must be confessed, (says a very judicious writer) that all the modern languages fall infinitely short of the antients in this point ; both the Greek and Latin tongues assigned, for the pronounciation of each syllable, an exact measure of time, in some longer, in some shorter, and so variously intermixed those two different measures in the same word, as furnished means for that variety of versification, to which we are altogether strangers.’ See a book entitled, *Observations on Poetry*, printed for Dodsley, in 1738, p. 108, in the chapter on versification ; where the reader will meet with many sensible remarks on this subject.

† ‘ Our different cadencies, (says the elegant author of *Elfrida*) our divisions, variations, repetitions, without which modern music cannot subsist, are intirely improper for the expression of poetry, and were scarce known to the antients.’

long short, as it suits the air, or recitative; and whilst the music pleases the ear, the words frequently offend it: if the poet and musician were always united in one person, which very seldom happens, this inconvenience might, with all the disadvantages of our language, be in a great measure lessened, if not entirely removed.

It is more than probable, and nearly demonstrable, that the theatrical declamation of the antients was composed and written in notes, and that the whole play, from beginning to end, (except the commoi and chorusses) were in a kind of * recitative like our modern operas; that it was † accompanied with music through-

* It is the opinion of P. Menestrier, and several other learned men, that the custom of chaunting in churches was originally taken from the ancient stage: as the theatres were opened at the commencement of the christian æra, it is not improbable, but that the common people might recite our Saviour's passion after the manner of the tragedians; certain however it is, that in our own nation, as well as in many others, the first tragedies exhibited were on religious subjects, and in some places continue so even to this day.

† The *μελοποια*, or melody, is mentioned by Aristotle, as one of the six essential parts of tragedy, and consequently must have been considered by him not as confined to the chorus, but diffusing itself through the whole drama. In the 19th chapter of his problems, he asks, why the tragic chorusses never sing in the hypodorian, or hypophrygian mood, which are both em-

ON ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 37

out, and that the reciter had little else to do, than carefully to observe the directions of the poet; the quantity of every word was ascertained, the time, duration, and rhythmus of every syllable fixed by the musician, so that he could not easily mistake or offend; the actor was not, as on our stage, left at liberty to murder fine sentiments and language by wrong accents and false pronounciation; by hurrying over some parts with precipitancy, and drawing out others into a tedious monotony; a good voice and a tolerable ear were all that the poet required of him.

Music is ranked by Aristotle amongst the essential parts of tragedy; nor is there the least reason to doubt but that it was considered by the antients both as useful and ornamental: it was most probably diffused throughout the whole piece, accompanying the recitation in the dialogue, directing the voice, and even perhaps the action and gesture of the perform-

ployed in the scenes; from which passage, as well as many others that might be quoted, it is evident that they sung both in the scenes, or dialogue part, and in the chorus also.

‡ In the third volume of L'Abbé du Boss's critical reflections on poetry, painting, and music; the whole eleventh chapter is employed in proving, or rather endeavouring to prove, that amongst the Romans theatrical declamation was divided between two actors, one of whom pronounced, whilst the other executed the gesticulation.

ers; varying it's movements according to the different passions to be excited in the breasts of the audience; it's different measures were always carefully* adapted to the metre, and took their names from the different feet made use of in the verse, as the dactylic, the ionic, pœonic, and the rest; the principal exertion of it's powers must, we may imagine, have been reserved for the songs, or intermedes of the chorus, where both the poetry and music admitted of much greater freedom and variety than in the other parts of the drama: thus we see, in the Antient Theatre, music always accompanied her sister science, assisted, animated, and supported her, was in short, in all respects, her friend and fellow-labourer,

Qualem decet esse sororem.

The office of a dramatic poet, in the time of antient tragedy, required, we may observe, a wider circle of knowledge, and far more extensive abilities, than the present age demands, or expects from him: for, besides all the other requisites, it was necessary that he should be master of every kind of verse, completely skilled

——I refer my readers to the book itself, where he will find many ingenious remarks on the theatrical representations of the antients.

* St. Austin has written a treatise, expressly to reconcile the various measures of antient verse with the principles of music.

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 39

in music, and able to direct all the evolutions, movements, or (if so we chuse to call them) the dances of the chorus. Euripides, we are told, instructed his fingers in the grave and solemn airs, which accompanied all his pieces; and Plutarch informs us, that the people of Susæ, and the Persians, by the command of Alexander, sung the tragedies of Sophocles, and his successors in the drama, according to the measures which those writers had themselves prescribed at the first representation of them.

Tragedy was in it's infancy, what Aristotle calls it, * made up of music and dancing; and the old tragedians, Thespis, Pratinas, Cratinus, and Phrynicus, according to Athenæus, bore the name of † dancers, because they used so much dancing in their chorusses. Tetrameters were therefor for a long time made use of in the verse; as that foot was most proper for motion, though it was afterwards changed to the iambic; when the dance ‡

* Ορχησικωτέρα.

† Ορχηστικοί.

‡ This movement was probably (as an excellent critic observes) becoming, graceful and majestic, as appears from the name usually given it, εμμελεια; 'this word (says he) cannot well be translated into our language, but expresses all that grace and concinnity of motion which the dignity of the choral song required.'

See notes on the art of poetry, v. 1. p. 151.

or movement was confined to the songs or intermedes of the chorus, which in the more perfect state of tragedy became, as I before observed, but a small part of the whole drama. What instruments the antients made use of in their theatrical music, and in what it's principal merit consisted, it is perhaps at this distance of time not easy to determine: if any of my readers are desirous of prying into a subject so dark and intricate, I must refer them to Plutarch's dialogue on this subject, together with Monsieur Burrete's observations on it in the tenth volume of the *hist. de l'Acad.* to which may be added P. Menestrier's dissertation on ancient and modern music, where they will meet with as much information as I believe can be given them on this head.

The use of music in-tragedy hath been matter of much doubt and contention with modern critics. M. Dacier thinks it by no means essential, and greatly condemns Aristotle for his approbation of it; it is, notwithstanding, indisputable, that on the ancient stage, music was a most beautiful adjunct to poetry, and contributed in a great measure to the high finishing and perfection of the Greek drama: we cannot perhaps so easily resolve, how far it may be reconcileable to modern manners,

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 41

though from some late experiments on * one of our theatres, we have reason to think that, when introduced with propriety, it might be attended with it's desired effect.

* In the representation of Merope, the solemnity of the sacrifice-scene is greatly heightened by music and song: the judicious manager of Drury-lane theatre has introduced it into several other tragedies with success.

On the Construction of the Greek Theatre.

THE Greek Theatre is amongst those superb monuments of antient taste, genius and magnificence, which would probably have survived the depredations, even of time itself, if ignorance and barbarism had not conspired to ruin and destroy it: of all those noble and costly structures which Athens and Sparta dedicated to the muses, we have now scarce any thing but a few inconsiderable remains, sufficiently striking to raise our curiosity, but at the same time too mutilated and imperfect to satisfy it. Those writers of antiquity, who have occasionally mentioned the construction of the theatre, as they treated a subject universally known by their cotemporaries, did not think themselves obliged to handle it with that degree of accuracy and precision, which were so necessary for the information of posterity; in consequence of which, they frequently gave names to one part of the building that more properly belonged to another, and by a confusion of terms, which could not mislead the readers of their own times, involved their successors in a labyrinth of error and obscurity; add to this, that the same fate hath attended the description of the building, which had before happened

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 43

to the several constituent parts of the drama; modern critics too often confound together the Greek and Roman theatre (though they differ most essentially in many parts;) we find terms frequently appropriated to one, which belong only to the other; and the whole so imperfectly delineated, by almost every one of them, as to render it throughout a matter of doubt and uncertainty. Some lights however have from time to time been thrown on this dark and intricate subject, whose scattered rays, when united and drawn to a point, will exhibit to us the following tolerably accurate, though still imperfect, representation of it.

The Antient Greek Theatre, in it's highest state of perfection, was a most spacious, noble, and magnificent structure, built with the most* solid and durable materials, and capable, we are told, of holding thirty thousand spectators: to give my readers a proper idea of it's form, I

* The theatre at Athens was originally built with wood; but being one day remarkably crouded on the exhibition of a tragedy, written by Pratinas, the benches fell in, many of the spectators were killed, and the whole fabric buried in ruins: this melancholy accident induced the Athenians, naturally fond of spectacles, to set about the construction of those superb edifices, which they afterwards made use of, built with the most costly marble, and adorned with every thing that could render them solid, noble, splendid, and magnificent.

shall divide it into three principal departments; one for the actors, which they called the scene; another for the spectators, under the general denomination of the theatre; and a third called the orchestra, allotted to the music, mimes, and dancers. To determine the situation of these three parts, and consequently the disposition of the whole, it is necessary to observe, that the plan (here annexed) consists on one side of two semi-circles, drawn from the same centre, but of different diameters; and on the other, of a square of the same length, but less by one half; the space between the two semi-circles was allotted for the spectators; the square at the end, to the actors; and the intervening area in the middle, to the orchestra. Thus we see, the theatre was circular on one side, and square on the other; round the whole were ranges of porticos, (see letters A and B) more or less, according to the number of stories, the most magnificent theatres always having three, one raised above another; to these porticos, which might properly be said to form the body of the edifice, the women were admitted, being the only places covered from rain and heat; the rest were intirely * open a-

* The amphitheatres in Spain were formerly built something in this manner, having no roof, so that the spectators were often exposed to rain, heat, and all the inclemency of the seasons.

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 45

bove, and all the representations in the † day-time.

The seats for the spectators (letter I) extended from the upper portico, down quite to the orchestra, (letter H) differing in their width and number with the size of the theatre, and were always so formed, that a line drawn from the top to the bottom, would touch the extremities of every one of them; between each story was a wide passage leading to the seats, every one of which, for the better accomodation of the audience, was at such a distance from the seat placed over it, that the feet of the persons above could not touch those who were below.

The magistrates were separated from the populace, by a place appropriated to them, called Βουλευτικός; the Εἰσιτικός, or seat of the youths, was assigned to the young men of quality and distinction; there were also some

† In many cities of the two Lombardies (as Riccoboni informs us) the spring of the year is allotted for comedies, which are represented in the day-time without any lights, the play-houses being built in such a manner as to be sufficiently enlightened by the sun; and in the year 1609, a regulation was made in France, by the civil magistrate, by which the players were ordered to open their doors at one o'clock, to begin the entertainment at two, and to put an end to it at half an hour after four.

apodestas, or first seats, allotted to persons of extraordinary merit, where all those were placed, who had distinguished themselves by any signal service to the common-wealth; such in process of time became hereditary, and were appointed for particular families; all these were very near to, or sometimes in the orchestra, and as close as the structure of the theatre would admit, to the scene, or place of representation,

The orchestra, being between the two parts of the building, one of which was circular, and the other square, partook of the shape of both, varying in it's size according to that of the theatre, though it's width was always double it's length, and that width always the semi-diameter of the whole edifice; to this they entered by passages under the seats of the spectators, the whole being entirely on a* level with the ground; this led also to the stair-cases, (letter K;) by † which they ascended to the dif-

* In the Roman theatre, the senators and chief magistrates frequently sat in the orchestra, where finding the inconveniency of the level, it was remedied by raising the seats a little above each other.

† Mons. Boindin reckons up very accurately the number of the stair-cases, and of the seats, together with many other minute particulars: what I have extracted from him may suffice to give the reader a general idea of the whole structure; if the curious in architecture

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 47

ferent stories of the theatre, some leading to the seats, others to the porticos, of course turned different ways, but all equally wide, disengaged from each other, and so commodious as to give sufficient room for the spectators to go in and out without the least crouding or inconvenience.

Between the orchestra and the stage, was the *υποσκηνιον*, hyposcenium (letter E) so called, because it was close to the scene or place of representation: here, it is most probable, were placed the instruments that accompanied the actors throughout the drama.

* Beyond this, was the large and vacant space called *προσκηνιον*, proscenium, or *λογειον*, (letter D) representing the scene of action,

are desirous of farther information, I must refer them to the discourse itself, which they will find in the first volume of the *hist. de l' acad.* quarto edition, p. 136.

* Beyond this part and the proscenium, Mr. Boindin places the Greek *Θυμελη*, or thymele (letter F) so called because in shape it resembled an altar: here, he imagines, the chorus was placed, and performed their songs and dances: but this place, with all due deference to that ingenious critic, could by no means be allotted to the chorus, being much too distant from the stage, where, we know from the tragedies themselves, the chorus must always be, as, besides the songs or intermedes, it bears a part in the dialogue throughout the piece; and consequently must stand close to the other actors.

which was always some public place, as a road, a grove, a court-yard, adjoining to some temple or palace; the length and breadth of this area or stage varied according to the size of the theatre, but was always of the same height, and, in the Greek theatre, never more or less than ten foot.

At the extremity of the whole building, was the *παρὰσκηνιον*, or post-scenium (letter G,) that place behind the scenes, where the actors dressed themselves, and prepared the habits, scenes, machines, and every thing necessary to the representation.

At the back of the stage (letter L) were the triangular machines for the scenery, called by the Greeks * *περιαντοι*, which, as they turned on their own axis, might be shifted on any oc-

* Utrique aliæ interdum portæ quarum in postibus affixe machinæ *περιαντοι* dictæ, quæ pro re ac tempore circumagebantur. Suid. To these Virgil is supposed to allude in the third book of the Georgics.

Vel scena ut versis discedat frontibus——

Which is thus explained by Servius. "Scena, (says he) quæ fiebat aut versilis aut ductilis; versilis tunc erat cùm subito tota machinis convertebatur, et aliam picturæ faciem ostendebat; ductilis tunc cum tractis tabulatis hæc atque illæ species picturæ nudabatur interior." What Virgil mentions, was probably an improvement on the *περιαντοι*, as practised in the Roman theatre.

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 49

caſion, and exhibited three different views or changes of ſcene; theſe were not made uſe of in tragedy, which required but one ſcene throughout, but moſt probably at the end of it, to prepare the exhibition of the comedy or mime, which in the antient theatre frequently ſucceeded each other, perhaps two or three times on the ſame day.

Amongſt the many peculiarities of the Greek Theatre, with regard to it's conſtruction, there is not perhaps any thing ſo remarkable, and which we can ſo difficultly form an idea of, as the echœa, or brazen veſſels, which, according to * Vitruvius, were made uſe of by the Greeks, to render the articulation diſtinct, and give a more extenſive power to the voice, an expedient doubtleſs extremely neceſſary in ſo large a theatre; for this purpoſe we are told, that they had recourſe to ſeveral round concave plates of braſs, placed under the ſeats of the ſpectators, ſo diſpoſed and contrived by the

* *Vafa ærea, (ſays Vetruius) quæ in cellis ſub gradibus mathematica ratione collocantur, ad ſymphonias muſicas, ſive concentus, ita componuntur uti vox ſceni- ci ſonitus conveniens in diſpoſitionibus tactu cum of- fenderit, aucta cum incremento clarior ac ſuavior ad ſpectatorum perveniat aures.*

To theſe echœa it is ſuppoſed, Caſſiodorus alludes, where he ſays, 'tragædia, concavis repercuſſionibus ro- borata, talem ſonum videtur efficere, ut pæne ab ho- mine non credatur.'

Caſſ. ep. 51. lib. 1.

most exact geometrical and harmonic proportions as to reverberate the voice, and carry the words of the actor to the farthest part of the building. The manner in which this was performed is, I must confess, to me utterly incomprehensible: certain it is, that no idea can be formed of it without the most profound knowledge of antient music, and ancient architecture. I shall not therefor trouble my readers with an explication of what few I believe would be able to comprehend; but if any of them are desirous of a more intimate acquaintance with these Brazen Echos, I must refer them to the sixth book of the learned Vitruvius, and Monsieur Burette's treatise on antient music.

ON ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 51

On the Scenes, Machines, and Decorations.

THOUGH we have no genuine or regular account now extant of the machines and decorations of the Greek theatre, we have sufficient reason to conclude from the tragedies themselves still remaining, that such things were made use of in the representation; as we find almost in every one of them, gods ascending and descending, ghosts and furies frequently appearing on the stage, with divinities celestial and terrestrial; for all these, we need not doubt but that the ancients had machines of various kinds, according to the various exigencies and circumstances that required them; and, as we learn from the scattered remains of Hyfychius, Pollux, and other writers, were no strangers to * trap-doors, flying chariots, magnificent arches, flights, ropes, pullies, and in short all the mechanical apparatus of the stage. As to the scenery, we know that the strict regard paid by the Greek tragedians to the unity of place confined the whole representation of their pieces to one particular spot; this however we find was sumptuously adorned with all

* Scenæ tragicæ (says Vitruvius) deformantur columnis, fastigiis, et signis, reliquisque regalibus rebus.

the embellishments, which art or nature could furnish; magnificent * columns, porticos, statues, paintings, basso-relievos, every thing, which the elegant taste and genius of Greece could produce, was added to enrich the scene; even so early as in the time of Æschylus, we are † told that the decorations of the theatre were made according to the exactest rules of perspective. The whole theatre (porticos excepted) being, as I before observed, uncovered, and consequently exposed to the heat of the sun, and inclemency of the weather; a kind of thin curtain, fastened probably to a large pillar or pole in the center of the building, was extended over the whole; as the heat notwithstanding (which is always the case in our modern tents) frequently penetrated through

* *Ανακισματα*, sunt rudentes scenici quibus per tractoria organa latentes personæ sustollebantur in scenam. *Εωρητα*, rudentes qui ex alto suspensi sunt ut sustineant eos qui ære ferri videntur. POLLUX.

† Tum Athenis, Agatarchus, Æschylo docente, tragediam primus scenam fecit, et de eo commentarium reliquit, ex quo moniti Democritus et Anaxagoras de eadem re scripserunt, quemadmodum oporteat ad aciem oculorum, radiorumque extensionem, centro constituto ad lineas ratione naturali respondere; uti de re incertâ certæ imagines ædificiorum in scenarum picturis redderent speciem, et quæ in directis planisque frontibus sint figurata, alia absidentia, alia prominentia esse videantur. VITRUVIUS, lib. viii.

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them, and the breaths of so numerous an assembly must have been offensive, they had recourse to artificial showers of rain, which they conveyed from the top of the porticos through the statues that were dispersed over the different parts of the building; * Mr. Boindin adds, that the water on these occasions was always scented, so that the spectators were not only refreshed by this gentle dew falling upon them, but at the same time regaled with the most exquisite perfume.

* As I do not remember that we have any authority from antient Greek writers for this anecdote, I should rather be inclined to consider the perfumed water as a refinement of modern luxury, and ascribe it to the improvements of the Roman theatre.

On the MASQUES.

IT appears from the united testimonies of several antient writers, that the actors of Greece never appeared on the stage in tragedy, or any other species of the drama, without masques: it is most probable, that before the time of Æschylus, to whom * Horace ascribes this invention, they disguised their features either, as in the day of Thespis, by daubing them with the lees of wine, or by painting, false hair, and other artifices of the same kind with those, which are practised in the modern theatre: masques however were soon introduced, and looked on, we may imagine, in those days as a most ingenious device. That, which they made use of in tragedy, was according to the best information we can gather concerning it, a kind of casque or helmit, which covered the whole head, representing not only the face, but the beard, hair, ears, and even in the women's masques, all the ornaments of the coif, or cap,

* Suidas and Athenæus attribute the invention of masques to the poet Chærilus. Horace gives the honour to Æschylus; but Aristotle, who we may suppose was as well acquainted with this matter as any of them, fairly acknowledges himself entirely ignorant of it. 'Τίς δὲ προσωπα, (says he) ἀπέδωκε, ἢ γυνεται.'

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being made of * different materials, according to the several improvements, which it received from time to time: the most perfect and durable were of wood, executed with the greatest care, by sculptors of the first rank and eminence, who received their directions from the poet. It seems to have been an established opinion amongst the antients, that their heroes and demigods, who were generally the subject of their tragedies, were of an extraordinary size, far surpassing that of common mortals; we must not be surpris'd therefor to find their tragic poets, in compliance with this popular prejudice, raising them upon † the cothurnus, swelling them

* The first masques were made of the leaves of a plant, to which the Greeks on this account gave the name of *προσωπιον*, 'quidam (says Pliny) Arcion personatam vocant, cujus folio nullum est latius.' Virgil mentions them as compos'd of the barks of trees.

Oraque corticibus sumunt horrenda cavatis.
And Pollux tells us, that they were made of leather, lined with cloth or stuff, *εἰδοτεν δ' ὀδονιον, ἐξωτεν δὲ σκυτινιον προσωπον.*

† The cothurnus, or buskin, was a kind of large and high shoe, the sole of which, being made of very thick wood, rais'd the actors to an extraordinary size: Juvenal tells us, that it made them appear extremely tall, and compares an actress without her cothurnus to a pigmy.

————breviorque videtur
Virgine pygmeæ nullis adjuncta cothurnis.

to an immense magnitude, and by the assistance of a † large frightful masque, endeavouring to fill the minds of the spectators with a religious awe, and veneration of them: the tragique masques were generally copied from the statues of the principal personages, and consequently conveyed the most exact idea and resemblance of them, which must have given an air of probability to the whole: those, which represented || ghosts and furies, were made still more terrible and frightful; but the masques of the dancers§, or persons, who formed the body of the chorus, had nothing disagreeable.

As in the infancy of tragedy there were probably but few actors, the use of masques gave

The cothurnus was probably of the same form as the high shoe, or piece of cork, bound about with tin or silver, worn by the Spanish women, called a chioppine, and which, it should seem by a passage in Shakespear, was used on our own stage. ‘Your ladyship is nearer heaven than when I saw you last, by the attitude of a chioppine.’

HAMLET, act 2. scene 7.

‡ The tragic masques had large and expanded mouths, as if (says the humorous Lucian) they were about to devour the spectators, ως καταπιόμενος της θεατας.

|| The masque, commonly used, was called simply προσωπειον; the others, μορμολυκειον, and γοργονειον

§ ‘Τὸ δὲ ὀρχήσεν σχῆμα (says Lucian) κοσμίον καὶ εὐπρεπές. Τὸ δὲ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ καλλίστον, τῷ ὑποκείμενῳ δρᾶματι εἰσικός ἢ κέχνητος, ἀλλὰ συμμεμνυκός.’

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them an opportunity of playing several parts, wherein the character, age, and sex were different, without being discovered; the large opening of the mouth was so contrived as to increase the sound of the voice, and send it to the farthest part of the theatre, which was so extremely large and spacious, that without some such assistance, we cannot easily conceive how they could be well heard or seen; in all theatrical painting, scenery and decoration, the objects, we know, must be magnified beyond the life and reality, to produce their proper effect; and, in the same manner, we may imagine that, in so extensive an area as the Greek theatre, it might be necessary to exaggerate the features, and enlarge the form of the actor; add to this, that at such a distance as most of the spectators were, the natural expression of the eyes and countenance must be intirely lost. The sanguine admirers of every thing that is antient bring many more arguments to defend the tragic * masque; but after all that can be

* Masques have had their admirers in modern as well as in antient times, and been used on more stages than that of Greece: even towards the middle of the last century, the actors both in tragedy and comedy on the French theatre wore masques. The English is doubtless in this respect, as well as in many others, infinitely superior to the Athenian stage; notwithstanding which, I will promise to join the *προσώπωνιοι*, and vote for the

said in its favour, it is perhaps scarce defensible; the face is certainly the best index of the mind, and the passions are as forcibly expressed by the features, as by the words and gesture of the performer: the Greeks in this, as in many other particulars, sacrificed propriety, truth and reason, to magnificence and vanity.

All the expences of the theatre were defrayed by the state, and were indeed so considerable, that nothing but the purse of an opulent republic could possibly have supported them, as it is confidently affirmed by † historians, that Athens spent more in dramatic representations than in all her wars.

restoration of the antient masque, whenever they will shew me one that can represent the happy features of Quin, in the character of Falstaff, or give us an idea of a frantic Lear, like the look and face of the inimitable Garrick.

† This assertion, which seems rather hyperbolic, is notwithstanding supported by the grave Plutarch, who, speaking of the Athenians, assures us, that the representation of the Bacchanals, Phœnissæ, OEdipus, Antigone, Medea, and Electra, cost them more money than the defence of their own liberties in the field, or all their contest with the Barbarians.

*Of the Time when TRAGEDY flourished in
Greece.*

IT was not my design in this short dissertation (nor could indeed be comprehended within the limits of it) to point out with Aristotle, what tragedy ought to be, but simply to shew what it was during the lives of the great triumvirate, as far as we can judge from the remains now extant. In my account of its several parts therefore, I have not followed the steps of the great critic, but principally confined myself to those particulars, which distinguish the antient from the modern drama, and which may best enable us to form a proper and adequate idea of the Greek tragedy; but even the most perfect knowledge of all the essential and constituent parts will be found insufficient for this purpose, unless we take into our view also the time when, and the very spot where, every piece was exhibited. Dramatic, as well as every other species of poetry, is best known and distinguished by the place of its birth; it will take its form, colour, and complection from its native soil, as naturally as water derives its taste and qualities from the different kinds of earth, through which it flows: it is absolutely necessary therefore, before

we can judge impartially of the Greek tragedies, to transport ourselves to the scene where they were represented, to shake off the Englishman for a time, and put on the Athenian.

It has been with great truth remarked, that there is allotted to every nation upon earth a particular period, which may be called their zenith of perfection, to which they approach by slow degrees, and from which, they gradually and insensibly recede: in this happy age of power and prosperity, the arts and sciences, taste, genius and literature have always shone with distinguished lustre: such was the time when Athens gave laws to all Greece, whilst the glorious victories of Marathon and Salamis animated every tongue with eloquence, and filled every breast with exultation: that haughty and successful people maintained for a long time her sovereignty over the neighbouring nations; her councils were influenced by prudence, and her battles crowned with conquest; the treasure, which she had seized in the temple of Delphos, enabled her not only to carry on her wars with success, but left her a plentiful reserve also to supply her luxuries: this was the age of heroes, philosophers and poets; when architecture, painting, and sculpture, fostered by the genial warmth of power and protection,

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so conspicuously displayed their several beauties, and produced all those superb monuments of antient taste and genius, which united to distinguish this illustrious æra : during this happy period, tragedy appeared in her meridian splendor, when the great triumvirate exhibited before the most polite and refined nation then upon earth those excellent pieces, which extorted applause, honours, and rewards, from their cotemporaries, and ensured to them the deserved admiration of all posterity : it may indeed with great truth be asserted, that the same remarkable love of order and simplicity, the same justness of symmetry and proportion, the same elegance, truth and sublimity, which appeared in the buildings, pictures and statues of that age, are conspicuous also in the antient drama.

In the time of the Greek tragedy, the Athenians dictated as it were to all mankind : proud by nature, and elated by riches and prosperity, they looked down with the utmost contempt on the neighbouring nations, whom they stiled and treated as barbarians ; as a republic, the avowed enemies of monarchy and dependence ; as a free people, bold and impatient of restraint or contradiction ; strongly attached to their own laws and customs ; lively and active, but

inconstant and superstitious: their manners plain and simple, but their taste at the same time elegant and refined. As the theatre was supported entirely at the expence of the public, the public directed all it's operations; we might naturally expect therefor, that the poet would for his own sake take care to adapt his compositions to the public taste; to fall in with national prejudices and superstitions; to soothe the pride, flatter the self-love, and adopt the opinions of his fellow-citizens: we must not wonder to hear, as we constantly do, (in the tragedies that remain) the praises of Athens perpetually resounded, the superiority of her laws and constitution extolled, and her form of government preferred to every other; oblique hints, or direct accusations of folly and weakness in her enemies; public facts frequently alluded to, and public events recorded; their own festivals, sacrifices, * religious rites, and ceremonies, carefully and accurately described; Sparta and Thebes, as rival states, occasionally satyrized and condemned; and above all, every opportunity to point out the evils of

* See, amongst many other instances, the noble description of the Pythian games, in the second act of *Electra*, v. 1. p. 137. of my translation of Sophocles, and the sacred grove of the Eumenides, in the *Oedipus Coloneus*, v. 2. p. 292.

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monarchy, and engrave their favourite democratical principles on the hearts of the people : it is not improbable but that many of those moral sentences, and political apothegms, which at this distance of time appear cold and insipid to us, had, besides their general tendency, some double meaning, some allusion to particular facts and circumstances, which gave them an additional lustre : without this key to the Greek theatre, it is impossible to form a right idea of antient tragedy, which was not, like our own, mere matter of amusement, but the channel of public instruction, and the instrument of public policy ; those readers therefor, who are utterly unacquainted with the religion, laws, and customs of Athens, are by no means adequate judges of it ; they only * condemn, for the most part, what they do not understand, and rashly judge of the whole edifice, whilst they view but an inconsiderable part of the building. But so warmly are we attached to what lies before us, and so prejudiced in favour of those modes and customs, which are established amongst ourselves, that we generally rate the merit of past performances by the standard and rule of present practice ; the antients therefor are subject to the disadvantage of being tried, not, as justice demands, by their laws, but by our own.

* *Damnant quod non intelligunt.* QUINTILIAN.

And here it is worthy of our observation to remark, that the Greek tragedy seems, in it's whole progress, to have kept pace with the place of it's birth, and to have flourished and declined with its native country; the rise of Athens, from meanness and obscurity to power and splendor, may be dated from the battle of Marathon, which laid the foundation of all her future glory; soon after which, we find Æschylus forming his plan of antient tragedy; after him arose the immortal Sophocles, who improved upon, and greatly exceeded his illustrious master; to these succeeded Euripides, born ten years after the battle of Marathon, and on the very day of the sea-fight at Salamis. Whilst these illustrious writers flourished, Athens flourished also, for above half a century: Euripides was fifty years of age, when the Peloponnesian war began; from which period the superiority of Athens visibly declined, and was soon entirely destroyed by the rival power of Sparta, in confederacy with the Persian monarch. Sophocles, happy in not surviving the honour and liberty of his country, expired one year after the taking of Athens by Lyfander, when the sovereignty of Greece devolved to the Lacedæmonians.

Of the three great TRAGEDIANS.

ÆSCHYLUS was born at Athens, in the first year of the * sixtieth olympiad : he embraced very early in life the profession of † arms, and distinguished himself as an officer at the famous battles of Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea : the perpetual scenes of slaughter and bloodshed, in which he was during a long series of years unavoidably engaged, tinged his imagination with that portion of the fierce and terrible so distinguishable in all his pieces : during the intervals of his military occupation, he found time to write no less than seventy, or according to some historians, ninety tragedies, only seven of which are now extant : when he was pretty far advanced in years, he lost the poetical prize to Sophocles, then but a boy, or, as other writers with more probability assert, to Simonides, in an elegy on the heroes, who fell at Marathon ; a circumstance, which so deeply affected him, that he immediately withdrew from Athens, and retired to the court of Hiero, king of Sicily, a friend of the muses,

* Five hundred and forty years before Christ.

† He had two brothers, who were likewise in the army, Cynegirus and Aminias : at the battle of Salamis, the former lost his life, the latter one of his arms.

whose palace was a kind of asylum for the discontented poets of Greece; there, we are told, he lived in great affluence and splendor, to the age of sixty-five: the writers of his life, not willing to admit that so great a poet could die a common death, have thought proper to dignify his last moments with a circumstance, which carries with it more of the marvellous than the probable: an oracle had, it seems, declared (for oracles were always ready on these occasions) that Æschylus should fall by the hand of heaven; accordingly, that this might be fulfilled, it is reported that an eagle was seen in the air, holding in her talons a tortoise, which (unfortunately for the bard) she let go, and dropping on the head of Æschylus, who happened to be walking beneath, fractured his skull. He is said to have gained thirteen victories over his rival poets, which one would think was an ample recompence for the single failure that gave him so much uneasiness. His tragedies were greatly admired during his life, and after his death held in the highest esteem, insomuch that a decree was passed by the senate, declaring, that if any person should exhibit the tragedies of Æschylus, the state would bear the charges of the chorus, and defray the whole expence of the representation; an honour, which probably had not been bestowed on any poet before his time, though

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afterwards, as I observed above, they were generally played at the public cost.

ÆSCHYLUS is a bold, nervous, animated writer: his imagination fertile, but licentious; his judgment true, but ungoverned; his genius lively, but uncultivated; his sentiments noble and sublime, but at the same time wild, irregular, and frequently fantastic; his plots, for the most part, rude and inartificial; his scenes unconnected, and ill-placed; his language generally poignant and expressive, tho' in many places turgid and obscure, and even too often degenerating into fustian and bombast; his characters strongly marked, but all partaking of that wild fierceness, which is the characteristic of their author; his peculiar excellency was in raising terror and astonishment in warm and descriptive scenes of war and slaughter: if we consider the state of the drama when he undertook to reform and improve it, we shall behold him with admiration; if we compare him with his two illustrious successors, he hides his diminished head, and appears far less conspicuous: were we to draw a parallel between dramatic poetry and painting, we should perhaps stile him the Julio Romano of antient tragedy.

SOPHOCLES was born at Colonè, a burgh

or village in Attica: his father Sophilus was, as some writers tell us, a *blacksmith; or, according to a more favourable heraldry, master of a forge. As the profession of arms was at that time more honourable, and probably more advantageous than any other, Sophocles entered into it, and followed the steps of his master Æschylus, both as a soldier and a poet; in the former capacity he had the honour to serve under the great † Pericles. As a dramatic writer, he was early distinguished for his extraordinary abilities, which first placed him on a level, and afterwards raised him to a superiority over his illustrious rival. He is supposed to have written one hundred and twenty tragedies, only seven of which are now remaining; these are received by his contemporaries with the applause they so highly deserved: it is remarked, that he never acted himself in any of his plays, as Æschylus and Euripides did, his voice being too weak and low for

* Much ink has been shed by the commentators on this subject, both with regard to Sophocles and Demosthenes also, who was, it seems, in the same predicament, it not being determined whether his father was a Vulcan or a common cyclop.

† Pericles, if we may believe Atheneus, used to say that Sophocles was a good soldier, but a bad officer; a circumstance, which, if he had not succeeded better as a poet, it is probable would never have reached posterity.

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the stage; though he was always present at the representation, and received the applauses of the audience, who, we are told, seldom failed to signify their approbation by a loud and general clap, both at his entrance into, and leaving the theatre: he was crowned twenty times, and though he probably sometimes shared the fate of his brother poets by unjust censure, could never be prevailed on, as his rivals were, to leave his native country, to which he took * every opportunity of shewing his sincerest attachment: with regard to his death, historians (if scholiasts and commentators may be so called) have indulged themselves in the same liberty which they took with his predecessor Æschylus; some kill him with a grape-stone; others tell us, that he died with joy at being crowned for one of his tragedies; whilst a third set gravely assure us, that having one day an inclination to play a part in his own Antigone, he dipped into a speech too long for his weak lungs, and expired, merely for want of a better breath, in the midst of it.

After all, as Sophocles, according to various testimonies, lived till ninety, it is not im-

* It is with great reason imagined, that Sophocles laid the scene of his latter OEdipus in Colonè, with a purposed design of doing honour to the place of his nativity.

probable that he might have died of † extreme oldage, a distemper, which is seldom perhaps more favourable to poets than to other men: the Athenians erected a sumptuous monument in memory of him, on which was engraved a swarm of * bees, in allusion to the name generally given him on account of his verses, which are, indeed, wonderfully soft and harmonious, or, as a nobler poet even than Sophocles himself expresses it, sweeter than honey, or the honey-comb.

Sophocles may with great truth be called, the prince of antient dramatic poets; his fables, at least of all those tragedies now extant, are interesting and well-chosen; his plots regular and well-conducted; his sentiments ele-

† The story of his sons ingratitude, told by Plutarch and others, is omitted here, because my readers will find it related in my notes on the translation of the Oedipus Coloneus. See vol. 2, p. 289.

Sophocles had several children, one of which, whose name was Iophon, is said to have inherited the dramatic genius of his father, and to have written four tragedies, the names only of which are come down to us, viz. Ilium, Achilles, Telephus, and Actæon.

* Sophocles was universally stiled, the Bee. Some commentators have taken the bees from off his tomb, and hived them in his cradle, assuring us, that when Sophocles was an infant, a swarm of them was seen to alight upon his lips, which was at that time looked on as a presage of his future eloquence.

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gant, noble and sublime; his incidents natural, his diction simple, his manners and characters striking, equal and unexceptionable; his chorusses well adapted to the subject; his moral reflections pertinent and useful, and his numbers in every part to the last degree sweet and harmonious: the warmth of his imagination is so tempered by the perfection of his judgment, that his spirit however animated never wanders into licentiousness, whilst at the same time the fire of his genius seldom suffers the most uninteresting parts of his tragedy to sink into coldness and insipidity; his peculiar excellence seems to lye in the * descriptive; and, exclusive of his dramatic powers, he is certainly a greater poet than either of his illustrious rivals. Were I to draw a similitude of him, as I did of Æschylus, from painting, I would say that his ordonnance was so just, his figures so well group'd and contrasted, his colours so natural, all his pieces in short executed in so bold and masterly a style, as to wrest the palm from every other hand, and point him out as the Raphael of the antient drama.

EURIPIDES, the son of Mnesarchus and Clito,

* For a proof of this, I would refer my readers to his fine description of the Pythian games in the *Electra*; the distress of *Philoctetes* in *Lemnos*; and the praises of Athens in the *OEdipus Coloneus*.

was a native of Salamis, to which place his parents had withdrawn to shelter themselves from the storm of war with which Greece was threatened by the invasion of Xerxes; he was born in the second year of the * seventy-fifth olympiad, in the midst of all the triumphal pomp which followed the famous victories of Salamis and Platæa: as the genius of Euripides was not turned like that of his two predecessors towards a military life, he attached himself to philosophy, at that time the fashionable taste and study of all Greece, under the celebrated † Anaxagoras; but partly perhaps from the fear of incurring his master's fate, and partly from the natural bent of his own mind, soon left the perplexing paths of science, and gave himself up to the more inviting charms of poetry: as the stage was probably then, as it is now, far the most lucrative branch of it, he applied himself early to the writing of tragedies, in which he succeeded so well, as to enter the lists with Æschylus and Sophocles: the immortal Socrates, to whom we may suppose

* Four hundred seventy-five years before Christ.

† Anaxagoras, amongst many other new opinions advanced by him, had asserted that the sun was a globe of fire; which gave so much offence to the ignorance and superstition of his countrymen, that he was forced to submit to a voluntary exile, as the only means of saving his life, which would otherwise have fallen a sacrifice to the enraged multitude.

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he was in a great measure indebted for the applause and encouragement bestowed on him; not only honoured him with his patronage and protection, but entered into the most intimate friendship and connection with him; he is even said to have assisted him in several of his plays; the moral and philosophic air, which runs through them all, seems indeed greatly to favour this opinion, which was industriously propagated by his * enemies, to obscure if possible the lustre of such conspicuous merit; he gained † five victories, and is supposed to have written seventy-five tragedies, only nineteen of which are now extant; some ‡ letters of Euripides, handed down to us, take notice of a quarrel between him and Sophocles, and gave an account also of a perfect reconciliation; though his tragedies were for the most part well received by his contemporaries, we may imagine that, like other poets, he met

* Diogenes Laertius, speaking of Socrates, says, *εδουκεν συμποσειν Ευριπιδην*. Mnesilochus told the Athenians, that Euripides was only a hammer-man to Socrates, and calls him *Ευριπιδης Σωκρατογομμευς*: the comic poets frequently reproach him for his obligations to the philosopher.

† Some commentators correct the text of A. Gellius, and make it fifteen.

‡ The English reader may find these letters at the end of my translation of the Epistles of Phalaris, published in 1749.

with some ill treatment from them, as we find in the later part of his life at the court of Archelaus, king of Macedon, who loaded him with favours, and treated him with all the respect due to his character and abilities: there, we are told, he lived in great affluence and splendor about three years, when unfortunately wandering one day into a solitary place, he was set on by a pack of hounds, and * torn to pieces, at the age of seventy-five. Aulus Gellius informs us, that the Athenians sent to Macedon for his body, and had prepared to grace it with a pompous and splendid funeral, but the Macedonians refusing to deliver it, they contented themselves with erecting a magnificent tomb to his memory, and gravings his name and honours on the empty marble: a copy of his works was carefully deposited amongst the archives, and so highly esteemed, that a king of Ægypt in vain for a long time solicited a copy of them, which the Athenians positively refused, till a famine happening in Greece, the

* One of his biographers acquaints us, that the dogs were planted there on purpose, and set on by a brother bard, grown jealous of his rising reputation, who took this opportunity to dispatch him: whether there be any truth in the whole story is extremely disputable; the author however might very well expect to gain credit for it, as it has been customary time out of mind, and continues so to this day, for rival poets to tear one another to pieces.

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king in return refused to sell them corn; necessity at last prevailing, they parted with the manuscript, and the king acknowledged so singular a favour, by permitting the merchants of Athens to take away as much corn as they wanted, without paying the usual tribute.

In such high esteem were the works of this poet, that many noble Athenians being taken prisoners at * Syracuse, the unfortunate captives were all put to death, except those, who could repeat any passages from the plays of Euripides; these men, and these alone they pardoned, caressed, treated with the utmost respect, and afterwards set them at liberty.

Euripides, fortunately for his own character, as well as for posterity, is come down to us more perfect and entire than either of his contemporaries; his merit therefor is more easily ascertained: his fables are generally interesting; his plots frequently irregular and artificial, his characters sometimes unequal, but for the most part striking and well contrasted, his sentiments remarkably fine, just and proper, his diction soft, elegant and persuasive; he abounds

* This story is related at large, in a small and elegant tract lately published, intitled, an Essay on the Influence of Philosophy upon the fine Arts, p. 21.

much more in moral apophthegms and reflections than Æschylus or Sophocles, which, as they are not always introduced with propriety, give some of his tragedies a stiff and scholastic appearance, with which the severer critics have not failed to reproach him: it is most probable however that in this he complied with the taste of his age, and in obedience to the dictates of his friend and master Socrates, who, we may suppose, thought it no disgrace to this favourite poet, to deviate from the rigid rules of the drama, in order to render it more subservient to the noble purposes of piety and virtue: there is besides, in his dialogue, a didactic and argumentative turn, which favours strongly of the Socratic disputant, and which probably procured him the name of the* philosopher of the theatre.

It is said of Sophocles, that he painted men as they ought to be; of Euripides, that he painted them as they were; a quaint remark, which I shall leave the critics to comment and explain, only observing, that the latter is much more familiar than the former, descends much lower into private life, and consequently lets down in some measure the dignity of the buskin, which in Sophocles is always carefully

* ὁ φιλοσοφῶν τῆς σκηνῆς.

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supported. There are some scenes in Euripides where the ideas are so coarse, and the expression so low and vulgar, as, if translated with the utmost caution, would perhaps greatly shock the delicacy and refinement of modern manners; the feeling reader notwithstanding will be amply recompensed by that large portion of the tender and pathetic, the peculiar excellency of this poet, which is diffused throughout his works; his chorusses are remarkably beautiful and poetical: they do not indeed, as Aristotle has observed, always naturally arise from and correspond with the incidents of the drama; this fault however they generally make amends for by the harmony of their numbers, and the many fine moral and religious sentiments, which they contain.

Upon the whole, though Euripides had not perhaps so sublime a genius as Æschylus, or a judgment so perfect as Sophocles, he seems to have written more to the heart than either of them; and if I were to place him with the other two in the school of painters, I should be inclined, from the softness of his pencil, to call him the Corregio of the antient drama.

FROM the works of these three illustrious writers, and from them * alone we must draw all our knowledge of the Greek tragedy, which in the view we have here taken of it appears to be full, complete and perfect, and has been miserably disjointed and torn to pieces by the moderns: from the ruins of this noble edifice, have arisen two very imperfect structures, the opera and tragedy of latter times, both greatly though not equally defective; the former, confining itself merely to the eye and ear, makes but a slight impression on the mind; whilst the latter, from it's omission of the chorus, music, scenery, and decoration, fall short of that beauty and perfection, which is only to be found in the antient drama; we must at the same time fairly acknowledge, that our manners and customs, our opinions, views, taste and judgment, are so different from those of Greece, that her drama is by no means in every respect a proper model and standard for modern poets, and must, after all we can advance in it's favour, always

* Of all the Greek tragedies produced by various writers, and which are almost innumerable, we have only thirty-three now remaining, though according to the generally received account, no less than two hundred and sixty or upwards were written only by the three great tragedians; all the rest, except a few inconsiderable fragments, fell a sacrifice to barbarity, and are buried in oblivion.

On ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 79

remain among those reproachful monuments of the purity and simplicity of former ages, which we cannot imitate, though we are forced to admire.

It must be at the same time confessed, that ancient tragedy hath it's share with every thing else of human imperfection: too strict an attention to the unities hath fettered and confined it; many of it's beauties are merely local and temporal; the plots are frequently uninteresting, and ill conducted, the speeches either too long or too short, the expressions sometimes coarse and indelicate; in the general management and representation of the whole, too much is sacrificed to popular prejudice, superstition and vanity, the ruling passions of an Athenian audience: too strong an attachment to the laws, customs, and form of government then prevailing, threw a dull air of uniformity over the drama; the same story, the same characters and sentiments, even the same expressions too often occur in different tragedies; that simplicity, which so distinguished the manners of the antients, had naturally it's influence over their taste also; they selected one plain but noble object, and all the variety, which their dramatic poets aimed at, or which the spectators required of them, was to place that in different lights, without suffering any other to

intercept the prospect of it; they admitted no episodes, under-plots, or any of those extraneous incidental ornaments, which make up modern performances, * and confined themselves principally to the faults and imperfections of the great, as Milton observes of them,

‘High actions, and high passions best describing.’

But because their taste was more correct and severe, it doth by no means follow, that it was less true and perfect than our own: the moderns heap incident on incident, sentiment on sentiment, and character on character; a change, which is perhaps rather to be attributed to the corruption of our taste than to the improvement of it. It is always a mark of a vitiated stomach, when wholesome and natural food is rejected with disgust, and provocatives used to raise the appetite; in the same manner, I cannot but be of opinion, that our impatient thirst after what critics affect to call business, is nothing but the result of false taste, and depraved judgment. Because antient tragedy is not crouded with a heap of unnatural episodes,

* One of the greatest advantages of modern tragedy over the antient, is perhaps its judicious descent from the adventures of demi-gods, kings, and heroes, into the humbler walk of private life, which is much more interesting to the generality of mankind.

ON ANCIENT TRAGEDY. 81

stuffed with similes, metaphors, imagery and poetical flowers, the moderns treat it with contempt, and find nothing in it but a poverty of sentiment, a want of order and connection in the scenes, a flatness and insipidity in the dialogue, a coarseness and indelicacy in the expression; but even if we grant the truth of every objection, there would still remain, to compensate for all these real or seeming imperfections, a variety of true and striking beauties: in ancient tragedy, and there only, we shall find a most exact and faithful picture of the manners of Greece, its religious and civil policy, sublimity both of sentiment and diction, regularity, symmetry and proportion, excellent moral aphorisms and reflections, together with the most elegant and amiable simplicity diffused through every page.

In a word, to affirm, as many who have more learning than judgment sometimes will, that there are no good tragedies but the ancient, is the affectation of scholastic pedantry; to deny them their deserved applause, and treat them with ridicule and contempt, is, on the other hand, the effect of modern pride, ignorance and petulancy. Upon the whole, French, Italian, Spanish and German critics, may perhaps find more excuse for their severe animadversions

82 A DISSERTATION, &c.

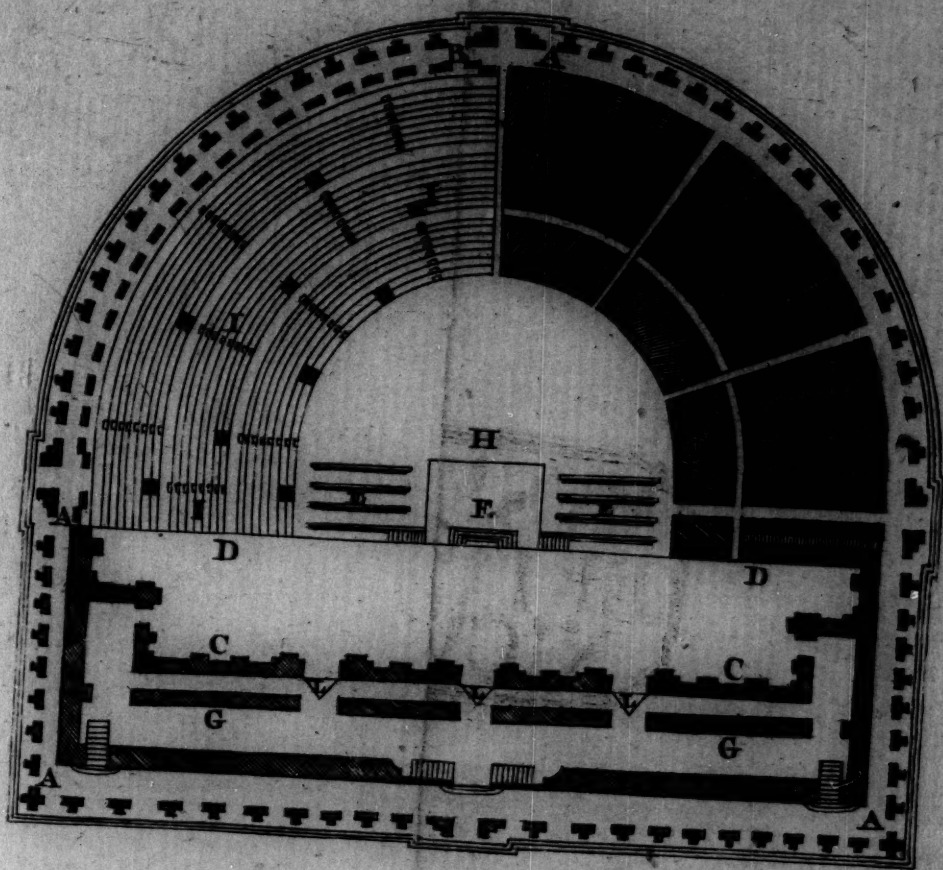
on the antient Greek tragedy; it may exercise their envy, and find employment for their spleen and ill-nature, at they have nothing of their own to put in competition with it; but Englishmen should be above such malevolence, because they can boast a dramatic writer, superior to all that antiquity ever produced: we may safely join with the most sanguine partisans of Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, in the sincerest admiration of their several excellencies, and rejoice within ourselves to see them all united and surpassed in the immortal and inimitable Shakespear.



THE END.

to fold out at the end

PLAN of a GREEK THEATRE



- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| A. Lower Portico. | F. The Thymele. |
| B. Upper or third Portico. | G. The Parascenium. |
| C. The Scene. | H. The Orchestra. |
| D. The Proscenium. | I. The Seats. |
| E. The Hyposcenium. | K. The Stair cases. |
| L. Triangular Machines for the Scenery. | |

THE PATENT OFFICE

IN WITNESS WHEREOF
I have hereunto set my hand
and the seal of the said
Office, this 10th day of
January, 1880.